

New York Times

A Libyan Strongman Looks to Washington, but a Health Crisis Looms

April 12, 2018

Declan Walsh

BENGHAZI, Libya — Pulverized buildings daubed with the names of fallen fighters line the ghostly seafront in Benghazi, Libya's second largest city. Land mines and booby-trapped bodies are scattered across the rubble. At night, men huddle over bonfires piled with broken furniture.

This picture of devastation is what victory looks like for Gen. Khalifa Hifter, the military strongman whose forces routed the last Islamist militias from Benghazi in December. After three years of grinding combat, and with the help of foreign allies, General Hifter now controls most of eastern Libya and has become the most powerful if polarizing figure in a fractured landscape.

Now, as he aims to consolidate and expand his power, he is looking to woo the Trump administration. In December, he hired a firm of Washington lobbyists to burnish his image as a potential future leader of his country, and to counter critics who denounce him as a crude warlord.

He has already allowed the C.I.A. to establish a base in Benghazi — a low-key American return to the city after Ambassador J. Christopher Stevens was killed there in 2012 — and a handful of American Special Forces operators are present at an air base near the city, American officials said.

The nomination of the C.I.A. director Mike Pompeo as secretary of state could further align General Hifter with the United States. Mr. Pompeo, whose confirmation hearing took place Thursday, and Mr. Hifter, a onetime C.I.A. asset, are avowedly hostile to all forms of political Islam.

But General Hifter's ascent has been called into question with news that the 75-year-old commander had been airlifted to a hospital in Paris, where French news media reported that he was being treated for a stroke. After initial denials, his aides privately conceded on Thursday that he had undergone emergency medical treatment. But they offered no specifics about his condition or his whereabouts.

The mystery plunged Libya's chaotic politics into greater-than-usual levels of speculation. If restoring some order to eastern Libya after the fall of Col. Muammar el-Qaddafi depended on the force of General Hifter's personality, there were fears of a descent into violent feuding if he were suddenly out of the picture.

"There was a time last year when Hifter was the man of the hour — people were speculating he could make it to Tripoli," said Frederic Wehrey, a senior fellow at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace and the author of "The Burning Shores: Inside the Battle for the New Libya." "Then things cooled off a bit, and cracks appeared in his coalition. And now nobody's sure what will come next."

Foreign Friends

Amid the competing militias ranging in post-Qaddafi Libya, General Hifter rose to power with the help of foreign firepower and a canny ability to play allies off one another. Warplanes deployed by the United Arab Emirates and Egypt pummeled his enemies and helped him capture oil terminals. French

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paramilitaries fought on his front lines in Benghazi, where three were killed in 2016. Saudi Arabia provided funding.

And to the discomfort of American officials, Russian special forces commandos last year delivered ammunition and intelligence to General Hifter from their bases in western Egypt, a former American intelligence official said, speaking on condition of anonymity to discuss classified information.

For much of his life, General Hifter was tied to the United States.

In the late 1980s, as a senior Libyan army officer living in exile in Chad, he led a C.I.A.-backed effort to oust Colonel Qaddafi. The plot failed and General Hifter ended up in suburban Virginia, where he lived for two decades, eventually becoming a naturalized American citizen, the former official said.

But after he returned to Libya in 2011 with brash ambitions of seizing power, American officials kept him at arms length.

Since 2015, American policy has backed the rival United Nations-backed government in Tripoli, a notoriously weak administration, which barely controls a single district of the capital but which remains the main Western hope for a political solution in Libya. The unity government's prime minister, Fayez Serraj, met with President Trump in the White House in December.

In the past year, though, as General Hifter's troops racked up major victories — advancing across Benghazi and seizing Libya's biggest oil terminal — European leaders started to openly court him.

Last summer, he traveled to Paris at the invitation of President Emmanuel Macron, met Italy's defense minister in Rome, and welcomed the British foreign secretary, Boris Johnson, to his fortified hilltop headquarters outside Benghazi.

General Hifter presents himself to the West as an unflinching warrior against political Islam in the mold of Egypt's president, Abdel Fattah el-Sisi, who is a former general. Critics say that approach strengthens his enemies, though, by forcing moderate and extremist Islamist groups together.

Although the septuagenarian commander has styled himself as a great military leader, with a fondness for pomp and titles, experts say his true skill is in forging alliances. His Libyan National Army is, in fact, a coalition of militias and regular army units.

Since last year he has used those skills to extend his influence into the deserts of southern Libya, a vast and largely lawless area where he has forged a number of tribal alliances, and which in recent years has become the main focus of American counterterrorism efforts. The United States has carried out nine missile strikes in southern Libya, mostly targeting Islamic State militants, since Mr. Trump took office.

But even before his recent health problems, Libya experts warned that General Hifter may not have been as strong as he pretended, and that the forces that helped him rise to prominence in the east could also be his undoing.

A Shaky Coalition

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In January, twin car bombings killed 35 people as outside a mosque in eastern Benghazi. Islamist militants were suspected. Hours later, one of General Hifter's top commanders dragged 10 blindfolded Islamist prisoners onto a street and, as a camera recorded his actions, shot each one in the head with a rifle.

The commander, Mahmoud al-Werfalli, was already wanted by the International Criminal Court in The Hague for his alleged role in previous summary executions. But when General Hifter detained Mr. Werfalli, promising to bring him to a military trial, armed supporters burned tires in the streets and shut down major roads.

General Hifter was forced to back down. The commander of the Benghazi special forces brigade, Wanis Bukhamada, defused the protests by promising that Mr. Werfalli would not be sent to the international court. "This is a matter for the Libyan courts," he said. Libyan courts, such as they are, have yet to take up the case.

That was the second challenge to General Hifter's authority. In November, a tribal commander, Faraj Gaa'im, was detained after he demanded on television that General Hifter step down.

Tribal opponents grumble that General Hifter's army is dominated by his Furjan clan, and that his sons act as his enforcers. For Benghazi residents, the complaint is that the religious militants who helped him seize Benghazi are now exerting a disproportionate influence on daily life in the city.

In the past year hard-line preachers have taken over many mosques, and conservative officials have shut down music concerts and tried to stop women from traveling while unaccompanied.

"It's like a bargain with the devil," said Naseim Omeish, 25, a development official. "They get control of the mosques so they can consolidate their power. But that can go wrong."

A Reluctant Democrat

Western efforts to bring General Hifter to the negotiating table have come to naught. In Paris last summer, he signed an agreement with Tripoli to hold elections by the end of 2018, but that now seems a distant possibility.

In interviews, General Hifter has shown little enthusiasm for a free vote. "Today's Libya is not ripe for democracy," he told the French magazine *Jeune Afrique* last month. "Perhaps future generations will succeed."

Many critics, especially in western Libya, see that as further proof that he is little more than a reconstituted version of Colonel Qaddafi, relishing power for power's sake and riding roughshod over basic freedoms and human rights. A United Nations report published this week highlighted torture, arbitrary detention and other abuses at jails run by General Hifter, as well as at those run by rival militias in the west.

Supporters say that, after seven years of chaos, a Qaddafi- or Sisi-style strongman may be exactly what Libya needs. "Believe me, I lost my faith in elections," said Amal Bugaighis, a lawyer and civil society activist in Benghazi. "Maybe in five or ten years time. But for now we need someone strong in charge."

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In recent months, General Hifter participated in talks with military officials from western Libya, mediated by Egypt, over proposals to forge a united national army.

But that is now on hold, as all eyes in Libya turn to the French hospital where he is undergoing treatment. A wild range of rumors circulated in Libya on Thursday, ranging from accounts that he was recovering well from his treatment, to those suggesting he had in fact died.

His spokesman said in a tweet on Wednesday that "all the news" about General Hifter's health was false. "Marshal Hifter is in excellent health, and he is following his daily general command duties," the spokesman said.

Were General Hifter to become incapacitated, one strong possibility is that the coalition that he so carefully assembled to take control of Benghazi would come apart at the seams, riven by strains and lacking a natural successor, said Mr. Wehrey, the analyst.

"For all Hifter's faults, he was the glue binding it all together," he said. "There's no comparable figure to fill his shoes."

The Libya Observer

Libya not ready for democracy, says eastern warlord Haftar, vowing to seize power if elections fail

January 9, 2018

Abdulkader Assad

The commander of the self-styled Libyan army in eastern Libya, Khalifa Haftar, said "Libya is not ready yet for democracy," adding in a statement to Jeune Afrique magazine that elections are now priority in the country, saying "if they failed, then our forces will seize control of the entire country."

Haftar slammed the Head of the Presidential Council Fayez Al-Sirraj as a weak person that is controlled by Tripoli militias, saying Al-Sirraj "has no free hands" and cannot make decisions or execute any orders.

"He only gives verbal orders with no long term plans. We tried to push him into being strict but in vain." Haftar added.

Haftar explained that Algeria could be a neutral mediator that can play a peaceful role in Libya's crisis, adding - after being asked whether or not Algeria would side with Al-Sirraj - that he is certain that if Algerian wanted to mediate a solution, then they will do it neutrally.

"It is necessary that elections be held before the elected officials manage to agree on the Libyan constitution, the voting shall be obligatory for all Libyans and the elections must be held as soon as possible with clarity and transparency." Haftar, whose loyalists tore down elections registration posters in areas under his control, further explained.

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Haftar, who is walking in the footsteps of his ally in Egypt Abdel Fattah Al-Sisi, also stressed the need to keep Muslim Brotherhood away from the organization of the elections as “they are linked to terrorists, whom they help in Libya.”

“Ghassan Salame must be aware of this and take into account.” Haftar remarked.

He added that the priority is now for the political process, saying once they saw a chance in the elections to resolve Libya’s crisis, they stopped and wanted to avoid any more bloodshed in Libya.

“But our patience is being tested and if we find the elections leading to a deadlock again, then we will use our sleeper cells in the areas not under our control to seize the entire country.

We now control 90% of Libya, we have 75000 soldiers and we can control Libya’s south, borders with Egypt and Tunisia.” Haftar told Jeune Afrique.

Haftar also slammed Saif Al-Islam Gaddafi, who is said to be preparing for a role in the elections, as a poor man that is being used by some people for money, adding that “some naïve people still believe in him.”

“We hail the Egyptian role in Libya and the understanding we have with the President Abdel Fattah Al-Sisi, who knows the threats posed to the country, especially the threat of Muslim Brotherhood on Libya, neighbors and the Europeans.” Haftar added.

New York Times

Trump Endorses an Aspiring Libyan Strongman, Reversing Policy

April 9, 2019

David Kirkpatrick

President Trump on Friday abruptly reversed American policy toward Libya, issuing a statement publicly endorsing an aspiring strongman in his battle to depose the United Nations-backed government.

The would-be strongman, Khalifa Hifter, launched a surprise attack on the Libyan capital, Tripoli, more than two weeks ago. Relief agencies said Thursday that more than 200 people had been killed in the battle, and in recent days Mr. Hifter’s forces have started shelling civilian neighborhoods.

Secretary of State Mike Pompeo said in a statement a few days after Mr. Hifter’s militia began its attack that “the administration at the highest levels” had made clear that “we oppose the military offensive” and “urge the immediate halt to these military operations.” Most Western governments and the United Nations have also condemned the attack and demanded a retreat.

Mr. Trump, however, told Mr. Hifter almost the opposite, the White House said Friday.

A militia leader who has given himself the title of Field Marshal, Mr. Hifter, 75, has long sought to portray his fight for power over Libya — including his advance on Tripoli — as a battle against “terrorism.” In the statement on Friday the White House said Mr. Trump had called Mr. Hifter on Monday to endorse that campaign.

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Mr. Trump called “to discuss ongoing counterterrorism efforts and the need to achieve peace and stability in Libya,” the White House said in the statement. “The President recognized Field Marshal Hifter’s significant role in fighting terrorism and securing Libya’s oil resources, and the two discussed a shared vision for Libya’s transition to a stable, democratic political system.”

Analysts said Mr. Trump’s endorsement would embolden Mr. Hifter and hamper United Nations efforts to call for a cease-fire. It could also increase the likelihood that his regional sponsors like Egypt or the United Arab Emirates might intervene on his behalf, as each has in the past in Libya.

The policy reversal came as a surprise in part because Mr. Hifter’s forces also appear to be losing ground. His promises of a quick victory have proved false, and his forces appear outmaneuvered by those aligned against them. Most analysts say that he has little hope of exerting his authority over all of Libya any time soon, so his continued campaign may only prolong the country’s instability.

In the meantime, the battle for Tripoli has now diverted the attention of most of the Libyan militias that had been engaged in combating the fighters of the Islamic State, also known as ISIS or ISIL, said Frederic Wehrey, an expert on Libya at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace.

“It is nuts,” Mr. Wehrey said of Mr. Trump’s statement. “Even judging by the hard-nosed American goals of stabilizing the flow of oil and combating terrorism, this is completely shocking.”

Mr. Trump’s endorsement is the clearest evidence yet of his preference for authoritarianism as the best response to the problems of the Middle East, a sharp departure from the professions of support for democracy by previous American presidents of both parties.

Although this is not the first time Mr. Trump has praised an Arab strongman, his expression of support for Mr. Hifter appears to be the first time that Mr. Trump has embraced an aspiring authoritarian who is not yet in power and may never get there.

A former general under Col. Muammar el-Qaddafi and also a former C.I.A. client, Mr. Hifter had been living in exile in the United States but returned to Libya during the Arab Spring uprisings in 2011. He first declared his intention to seize power in 2014, when Libya’s nascent transitional government was struggling to establish its authority over freewheeling militias around the country.

Mr. Hifter vowed to rid Libya of Islamists of all kinds, and he quickly attracted support from Egypt, the United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia. All three had aligned themselves in a regionwide campaign to crush the Muslim Brotherhood-style political movements that had appeared poised to ride Arab Spring elections to power.

Mr. Hifter has never shown a willingness to accept any civilian authority. But “he fits to a T the kind of leader Trump likes to support,” said Andrew Miller, deputy director for policy at the Project on Middle East Democracy.

Even with the extensive backing of his foreign supporters, though, Mr. Hifter has often struggled for military gains, taking three years to control the city of Benghazi. Although he now controls most of

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eastern Libya, his surprise advance on Tripoli has united the powerful militias from the western cities of Misrata and Zintan against him.

"I don't think Hifter can do it," said Lisa Anderson, a political scientist who has studied Libya and who was the president of the American University in Cairo during the uprisings of 2011. Although he may present himself as a strongman, she said, "he can't actually control that part of the country and he will continue to face existential challenges there for the foreseeable future."

AFRICOM Public Affairs

U.S. Africa Command airstrike targets ISIS-Libya

September 30, 2019

In coordination with the Libyan Government of National Accord, U.S. Africa Command conducted an airstrike targeting ISIS-Libya terrorists in southern Libya, September 29, 2019.

"Our pursuit of ISIS-Libya and other terrorist networks degrades their ability to effectively conduct operations against the Libyan people," said U.S. Army Maj. Gen. William Gayler, U.S. Africa Command director of operations. "By disrupting the terrorists' planning, training, and activities, we also degrade their capacity to threaten U.S. and partner interests in the region."

U.S. Africa Command continues to support diplomatic efforts to stabilize the political situation in Libya in order to maintain our common focus on disrupting terrorist organizations that threaten regional stability.

At this time, it is assessed the airstrike killed seven (7) terrorists.

Currently, we assess no civilians were injured or killed as a result of this airstrike.

Bloomberg

Libya Strongman Plans to Press Tripoli 'Jihad' Despite UN Plea

May 5, 2019

Samer Al-Atrush

Libyan military strongman Khalifa Haftar urged his troops to continue their offensive to capture the capital Tripoli, ignoring a plea by the United Nations for a cease-fire coinciding with the Muslim holy month of Ramadan.

Haftar's attempt to take the capital and overthrow the UN-backed government in Tripoli has ground to a halt on the outskirts of the city, where militias who oppose the eastern-based strongman have put up stiff resistance.

The UN mission in Libya had called on Sunday for a humanitarian cease-fire to halt the month-long clashes that have killed more than 300 people.

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But in a statement read by his spokesman Ahmed al-Mismari on the Libyan Al-Hadath television station, Haftar ordered his self-styled Libyan National Army to pursue the offensive.

"Ramadan is the month of jihad," Haftar said, according to Mismari. "Our battles against terrorism in Benghazi and Derna didn't stop in Ramadan in the past," he said of eastern cities his forces had captured in 2017 and 2018. Ramadan starts on Monday in Libya.

Haftar urged his forces to maintain discipline and pursue their retreating enemies.

The strongman who had captured the east and south of the divided OPEC state before setting his sights on the capital has been supported by the U.A.E., Egypt and Saudi Arabia. U.S President Donald Trump had also indicated his support in a phone call to Haftar last month, U.S officials said.

Other countries have condemned the offensive, which upended a planned UN-sponsored conference meant to lay the ground for elections.

Sputnik News

Field Marshal Haftar Urges to Cancel UN Embargo, as Libyan Army Needs Arms

October 15, 2019

BENGHAZI (Sputnik) - Field Marshal Khalifa Haftar, the head of the Libyan National Army (LNA), has explained the situation in the war-torn country and described Libya's potential future in an interview with Sputnik.

Khalifa Haftar stated that the country could have eliminated terrorism years ago, but the international arms embargo stopped the military from obtaining weapons, while the terror groups managed to smuggle arms without difficulty.

"The continuation of the international embargo means a boost for terrorism and war, the aggravation of its consequences. If not for the embargo, then we would have eliminated terrorism years ago and should have not paid such a high price for it. It should be noted that, despite the embargo, a vast amount of weapons is openly delivered to terrorist and armed groups in Libya by air and sea. We wonder how the world allows this on the one hand, and on the other, calls to fight against terrorism", he said.

He noted that at the moment there is no contact between the LNA and their opponents from the Government of National Accord (GNA).

"Unfortunately, we have wasted our precious time in dialogue with him [the Council's president Fayeza Sarraj] in response to regional and international endeavors, but now there is no mediation, neither international nor local, and also between us and the council, including its head", Haftar said.

The LNA chief remarked that there was a "misconception that the so-called Presidential Council [of the GNA] can instruct terrorist and militia forces, which the army is fighting, to continue fighting or, for example, set a ceasefire".

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"This is a big lie which now has been discovered at the local and international levels. The truth is that the Council receives instructions from these groups and not vice versa, and its role is limited to providing money, weapons, and mercenaries based on the orders issued to it [the Council]. And the orders should be implemented immediately", the field marshal said.

"None of the few remaining council members, starting with its president, dare to reject the instructions from those terrorist gangs. The Presidential Council can only execute orders. This is a fact that no longer needs to be proved. The Council itself includes more than one member belonging to terrorist organisations", he continued.

Since the overthrow and assassination of Libyan leader Muammar Gaddafi in 2011, the country has been gripped by civil war. Libya is now divided between two governments, with the eastern part controlled by the LNA and the western part governed by the Government of National Accord.

Future of the Country

The head of the LNA also explained that the country's fate depends on the liberation of Tripoli from terrorists and armed groups. He noted, however, that no specific timeline can be set for liberating the capital city.

"This is a war to release the capital with around 2 million people. It's not a project for which we can set a specific timetable ... We can end the war in a day or two, sweeping away all on the way by heavy weapon, but it would lead to the destruction of the city and heavy civilian casualties", Haftar said.

The army places citizens' safety above all else, he added, noting that the LNA aimed at defending Tripoli residents from militias' violence, but not at entering the capital "at any cost."

"We don't want to harm the citizens and facilities, that's why we were trying to lure these groups to the outskirts of the city. [As a result,] we succeeded in this, the terrorists have suffered great losses among their ranks. We will enter Tripoli to restore its prestige, status and role as the capital for all Libyans, a capital of security and peace, and we will rid our people of the fractures of armed militias and terrorist groups", the Field Marshal pledged.

In April, Haftar's forces engaged in an offensive to capture Tripoli from the rival forces of the UN-backed GNA. According to the World Health Organisation, at least 1,000 people died during the clashes.

Elections for Libya

The Field marshal said he does not currently consider running for president, as the climate in the country is not yet ready for the election.

"The question of my candidacy for the presidency or not is not my current concern at all" Haftar said, when asked whether he would run for the presidency after military operations were completed. He specified that the country would first need to boost its security and socioeconomic sphere.

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Haftar also commented on the recent statement of Saif Islam Gaddafi, the son of the late Libyan leader who had expressed his readiness to participate in the vote, stressing that there was no enmity between the two.

"He is a Libyan citizen. If the legal conditions are met, it is his natural right [to participate in the elections]", Haftar said, when asked about Saif Islam Gaddafi's plans to run in the upcoming presidential election.

The field marshal added that it was not his concern "if he [Gaddafi] is in the country or abroad."

"I do not know where he is now and there is no communication between us, but this, of course, doesn't mean any disagreement or enmity. Our enemies are the terrorists, and everyone who carries arms against the citizens, attacks the sanctity of the people, preying on their dignity, loots the wealth of Libyans and jeopardizes the safety of the country," Haftar said.

Middle East Eye

Libya's Haftar promotes accused war criminal wanted by international court

July 9, 2019

An internationally wanted military commander in Khalifa Haftar's Libyan National Army (LNA) who is accused of war crimes has been promoted, according to the LNA's official Facebook page.

Mahmoud Mustafa al-Werfalli, the subject of an arrest warrant issued by the International Criminal Court (ICC) in August 2017, was promoted from the rank of major to lieutenant colonel by Haftar, the LNA's commander-in-chief, the LNA said in the statement.

The ICC warrant accuses Werfalli of "alleged responsibility for murder as a war crime" and carrying out execution-style killings of 33 prisoners between March and July 2017 and in June 2016 that were filmed and posted to social media sites.

It was the first time the ICC had issued an arrest warrant based solely on social media-sourced evidence in a case involving a Libyan military commander.

The charge against Werfalli is based on seven incidents of alleged executions which were documented in seven separate pieces of video footage.

After the ICC said it was seeking Werfalli's arrest in August 2017, the LNA announced that it was investigating him and had detained him, though his whereabouts then were unclear.

In January 2018, fresh footage emerged which appeared to show Werfalli carrying out summary executions.

The footage appeared to show the executions taking place in front of Benghazi's Bayaat al-Radwaan mosque, after a twin bombing on 23 January left at least 37 people dead.

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Born in 1978, Werfalli is a commander of the Al-Saiqa (Thunderbolt) Forces, an elite unit that defected from Libya's military during the 2011 uprising that toppled and killed longtime leader Muammar Gaddafi.

Werfalli subsequently fought on the same side as the LNA and its leader Haftar, who refuses to recognise the authority of a UN-backed government based in Tripoli and supports a parallel administration in eastern Libya.

ICC chief prosecutor Fatou Bensouda has repeatedly called for Werfalli's arrest, including by appealing to Haftar to hand him over during an address to the UN Security Council in November 2017.

Currently, Haftar's LNA troops are waging a military offensive to capture the region around the capital Tripoli, known historically as Tripolitania, where 3.5 million live, representing almost 60 percent of Libya's population.

The LNA has so far failed to capture Tripoli, and the pro-government forces on the capital's outskirts have successfully slowed Haftar's advance.

In recent months Libya's political and military situation has been muddled further by foreign interventions.

The US and other western powers, for example, officially back Libyan Prime Minister Fayez al-Sarraj's Government of National Accord, but his administration has accused them, especially France, of covertly backing Haftar.

Last month, after Donald Trump spoke on the phone with Haftar, the White House said in a statement that the US President "recognised Field Marshal Haftar's significant role in fighting terrorism and securing Libya's oil resources".

Anadolu Agency

Libya's Haftar promotes officer wanted for war crimes

July 8, 2019

Mohamed Sabry Emam Muhammed

East Libya-based military commander Khalifa Haftar has promoted an officer wanted by the International Criminal Court (ICC) for war crimes, according to local Libyan sources.

Army Major Mahmoud al-Werfalli was promoted to the rank of lieutenant-colonel, the sources said Monday on condition of anonymity due to security concerns.

Observers see the move as defiance by Haftar to the ICC, which issued an arrest warrant in 2017 for al-Werfalli amid allegations that he had committed war crimes in Libya.

In an earlier video that surfaced online, al-Werfalli can be seen executing 10 people in Benghazi after the eastern city was rocked by a deadly bombing.

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Last year, the UN Support Mission in Libya (UNSMIL) demanded al-Werfalli's immediate extradition.

In early April, Haftar, who commands forces loyal to a rival government based in eastern Libya, launched a wide-ranging campaign to take the capital Tripoli from the UN-recognized Government of National Accord.

His forces, however, have failed to achieve their primary objective, although they have captured several strategic towns and cities in the vicinity.

Libya has remained beset by turmoil since 2011 when a bloody NATO-backed uprising led to the ouster and death of long-serving President Muammar Gaddafi after more than four decades in power.

Since then, the country's stark political divisions have yielded two rival seats of power -- one in Tobruk and another in Tripoli -- and a host of heavily armed militia groups.

The Independent

Libyan commander courted by European countries accused of war crimes in battle for Derna

January 31, 2019

Bel Trew

Forces loyal to a powerful Libyan military commander once courted by the west are likely to have committed war crimes in the eastern city of Derna, London rights lawyers have revealed, urging the International Criminal Court to investigate instances of torture, murder and mutilation of corpses.

The legal opinion, which was shared exclusively with The Independent, marks the first time General Khalifa Haftar's troops have been formally accused of war crimes in the coastal city, under their control since last summer.

Geneva-based Libyan group Human Rights Solidarity, which commissioned the report, intends to file it with International Criminal Court prosecutors in the coming weeks.

Human rights lawyer Rodney Dixon, of Temple Garden Chambers, reached this conclusion after studying multiple videos and photos taken in Derna and posted online, which purport to show Gen Haftar's self-styled Libyan National Army (LNA) shooting unarmed civilians, stringing up mutilated bodies and indiscriminately shelling residential areas.

Rights groups have repeatedly accused the LNA, which controls swathes of territory in the east and south of Libya, of committing war crimes in cities like Benghazi.

Last July, the ICC issued a second arrest warrant for Gen Haftar's special forces commander Mahmoud al-Werfalli after several videos appeared online apparently showing him murdering captured fighters.

But the new report now sheds light on allegations of abuse in Derna.

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"This evidence appears to depict the commission of the war crimes of murder, mutilation, torture, cruel treatment, outrages upon personal dignity, and the targeting of civilians," the report said.

"It is imperative that the perpetrators and their commanders should be investigated to obtain all available evidence so that those responsible can be brought to justice."

"These investigations should be undertaken by the ICC which has jurisdiction over the Libya situation, if no genuine domestic investigations are under way," it added.

The LNA has denied allegations of abuse in the past. In a statement to The Independent on Thursday, it declined to comment on the latest accusations.

But Human Rights Solidarity, which has also investigated Tripoli-based forces that rival Gen Haftar's men, said the United Nations and the media are failing to shed light on rampant abuses being committed across the country.

"This marks the first legal opinion which will be submitted to the ICC of the widespread abuses in Derna. General Haftar's forces have been accused of potentially committing crimes with the siege, but this report reveals there are many more abuses," said Ahmed Algaseer, the group's senior rights researcher.

"There is widespread impunity in Libya, people are not just committing crimes but actually documenting them. No one gets punished so we have spent the last three years trying to secure some accountability," he added.

Gen Haftar has led the LNA since returning to Libya during the 2011 Arab Spring. He previously lived in exile in the US. Despite mounting evidence of abuse, over the last few years he has been courted by several countries including Italy, France, Russia and Egypt as a key player and potential leader in Libya.

For years he was loyal to a rival government anchored in the eastern city of Benghazi that opposes the UN-recognised cabinet in Tripoli, but in 2017 agreed to join forces with prime minister Fayez al-Sarraj to help hold national elections.

In June last year his troops took control of Derna, which was nominally controlled by an al-Qaeda-linked group, after controversially laying siege to the city, including allegedly preventing supplies from entering and families from returning home.

In November 2017, Human Rights Watch revealed armed groups loyal to the LNA may have executed as many as 36 men in the town of Abyar, about 30 miles east of Benghazi.

Last February HRW said that displaced families had been prevented from returning to Benghazi.

The new legal opinion cites as possible war crimes several incidents, including one caught on a mobile phone, which shows unarmed civilian residents of Derna being shot repeatedly on the ground, even after they appear to be dead.

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In other footage, dead bodies are toyed with, hung from machine gun turrets and draped over the bucket of an excavation digger, which the report says are also crimes of outrages on personal dignity.

The report cited several other videos which show civilians being shot at and victims being forced to unzip their trousers before being executed.

It concludes that the crimes shown in the videos and photos could also amount to crimes against humanity. It urged the international community to investigate the commanders including Gen Haftar for potentially ordering and directing the violations, or for failing in their duties to effectively prevent or punish the crimes committed by their subordinates.

“It is a crime against humanity if it can be established on all the evidence that they were committed as part of a widespread or systematic attack directed against the civilian population of Derna,” the report concludes.

“The investigation and prosecution of those up the chain of command is very important in order to establish the full record of criminal activity, to guarantee accountability and justice, and to deter the future occurrence of similar crimes in the conflict.”

Libya was plunged back into civil war in 2014 when Islamist militia ousted armed groups allied to Gen Haftar from Tripoli. The general’s forces in the east meanwhile battled to rid the second city of Benghazi from militias and jihadis.

Gen Haftar was a commander in Colonel Gaddafi’s armies until 1987 when he was taken as a prisoner of war during Libya’s disastrous conflict with Chad. After Gaddafi abandoned him, he tried to overthrow the leader and when that failed ultimately sought asylum in Virginia, US.

In January, Gen Haftar officially ordered the start of “comprehensive military operations” in southern Libya to tackle jihadi and other armed groups in the area and protect key installations.

New York Times

U.S. Military Again Strikes ISIS in Southern Libya

September 27, 2019

Eric Schmitt

For the third time in a week, the United States military carried out an airstrike on Thursday against Islamic State fighters in southern Libya amid indications the terrorist group was seeking to exploit the country’s civil strife to increase its recruiting.

The Pentagon’s Africa Command said in a statement on Friday that the strike — which other officials said was carried out by an Air Force Reaper drone based in neighboring Niger — killed 17 militants in an unidentified location in southwest Libya.

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"We will continue to pursue ISIS-Libya and other terrorists in the region, denying them safe haven to coordinate and plan operations in Libya," Rear Adm. Heidi Berg, the command's director of intelligence, said in the statement, noting that the strike was coordinated with the Libyan government in Tripoli.

The strike was the latest in a flurry of attacks in a largely ungoverned portion of the country. Earlier, the Africa Command said that on Sept. 19, an airstrike killed eight ISIS fighters in a compound in Murzuq, Libya, nearly 600 miles south of Tripoli, the capital. Five days later, the military said it killed 11 more fighters in an airstrike in the same area.

Taken together, the three missile attacks were the first American airstrikes this year in Libya against Islamic State or Qaeda fighters, after the military conducted six aerial attacks last year, most recently in November 2018.

Nathan Herring, a spokesman for the Africa Command at its headquarters in Stuttgart, Germany, declined to provide further details about the latest strike, saying analysts were still assessing its results.

Frederic Wehrey, a senior fellow at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace and the author of "The Burning Shores: Inside the Battle for the New Libya," cited social media reports in Libya saying that the strikes had targeted Malik Khazmi, a major ISIS facilitator and recruiter from Bani Walid.

Mr. Wehrey, who last visited Libya in June, said that Mr. Khazmi had been an important ISIS recruiter and architect of its clandestine fighter networks since 2014, surfacing in pivotal combat areas like Derna, Tripoli and Surt, before fleeing into the southern desert.

Until a drone strike against Qaeda fighters in southern Libya in March 2018, the Pentagon had focused its counterterrorism attacks in the country almost exclusively on Islamic State fighters and operatives farther north. Over several months in 2016, the military conducted nearly 500 airstrikes in the coastal city of Surt to destroy the Islamic State's stronghold there.

Many ISIS leaders, like Mr. Khazmi, fled south before the fall of Surt, and from there have been trying to exploit the country's security vacuum and civil strife to increase recruiting and reconstitute an effective guerrilla force, analysts said.

Mr. Wehrey cautioned that in the remote and politically fractured landscape of southern Libya, the line between who is a militant or terrorist or militiaman is frequently blurred, and there is the potential for these strikes to err and inflame ethnic and tribal tensions.

"There's been collateral damage in the past," he said.

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